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Atari Online News, Etc.
A-ONE Online Magazine
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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I know, this week's issue is a few hours late getting out. Well, I am still "officially" out on vacation, so some leniency should be allowed! I can't believe that these two weeks are almost over!

Overall, it was a great vacation. There were some high and low points, to be sure! Everything that had to be done was completed, with days to spare. The weather, for the most part, was terrific. Sure, there were a few extremely hot and humid days, but that's why pools were invented! We had thundershowers, but mostly in the evening when it really didn't matter (tell that to one of my dogs who runs and hides every time she hears thunder!).

I did manage to get to Maine, but not to visit my family. A bunch of us headed north (4 1/2 hour drive!) for a 2-day golfing excursion. It was truly beautiful country up there in the mountains and the course was magnificent - to look at! It was a tough course to play, but we had a lot of fun. Sorry, my scores are a secret!

Back home, we finally entered the 21st century and got hooked up to the town's sewer system - no more septic system! That's the good news! Getting to that point was a tale of horror. I'll make this short as I'm still fuming. The sewer lines were put in our neighborhood during this past winter. A few months later, we received letters saying that we could now tie-in to the system. Look around for a contractor, etc. We did. Ours came out a few weeks ago to scope out the job. He had a listing of the neighborhood which showed where each home's tie-in was located at the street level. He wanted to confirm and took measurements according to the town's readings. The two readings that the town had down for our house didn't come out at the same spot! He called the town's engineers to come out and validate the correct location, and mark the street and land to show the correct spot. They did that days later. I was scheduled to have the work done this past Tuesday.

Monday night, I get a call late in the evening. The excavating machine was down and needed repair. The work would be postponed until Wednesday. Fine, gave me a chance to rest up from the long drive back from Maine the previous day. Wednesday morning, comes, the crew is here at 7:00 a.m. as planned. Great, things were going well.

And then everything went downhill from there! The "validated" location for

the tie-in was determined to be under the mailboxes (we have roadside boxes) near the street in my side yard. The contractor dug, and dug, and dug some more. A hole 10-feet deep (the tie-in was supposed to be at 8-feet) and 6-feet wide didn't find the connections. A call was made to the engineers again - come out and figure this out! She came, checked the readings, scratched her head, and was at a loss. Check the readings again. Naturally, using the town's readings, they again came up with the conclusion that the two sets of readings came out in two locations. The first one came up empty, try the second (after 3 hours of digging in the first!). The problem was that the second reading showed the connection to be located UNDER my driveway! No way would anyone be stupid enough to do that - it didn't make any sense. To make a long story short - yes, it was found under my driveway. The contractor had to remove another section of my fence, dig up a number of my plants, and dig up half of my driveway - the entire length. So now I'm after the town to get my driveway re-done since it was their mistake. Of course I could find no one in the town's engineering department when I went calling. I left a note and will hound them until I get this resolved, for free! The single "benefit" from all of this, other than no more septic system, is that my side yard has been "renovated". 95% of that area has been dug up, re-leveled, re-loamed, and re-seeded. It was, up to now, the worst section of my lawn. Maybe now it will look a lot better than in previous years!

And then it's back to work on Monday! I just know that I'll be "greeted" with all kinds of issues and it will be a week before I'll be able to find my desk from under the pile of expected backlog of paperwork! Hmmm, I think I still have a few cold beers hidden in the back of my refrigerator! Speaking of beer, remember that next week is July 4th (already?!?!). Partying, fireworks, driving, and alcohol do not mix! Be responsible, and be safe! Me, our neighborhood has a block party planned so we'll have fun and be safe.

Until next time...

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->A-ONE User Group Notes! - Meetings, Shows, and Info!
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NAS 2002 News

Hi all!

NAS 2002 is now On-Line and you can meet all of us at #atarinas IRCnet. I will attend tomorrow (saturday) and start up two webcams and fill my homepage with a plethora of pictures this NAS weekend.

Most of us from The Swedish Atari Users Association board will arrive tomorrow, but there already some folks at NAS. Erik Hall, Kenneth Medin, Nick Harlow to mention a few known.

From my homepage you can participate with additional info have to get in touch or watch all the pictures taken.

http://mille.atari.org

Best Regards

Mille Babic
The Swedish Atari Users Association
Chairman

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING

compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. I've got to tell you that I find it refreshing to hear that there are still people who read this column. With the easy access to the UseNet, it doesn't really seem that there's a need for a column like this.

I have been told, however, that for some people, it's easier to read this column rather than wade through all the messages available. Unfortunately, that's not much of an issue these days. A dedicated reader could easily go through a week's messages in a few hours without any problem.

Well, if there's easy access and a manageable volume of messages, why continue with this column?

Every so often... not every week, mind you, but often enough to keep it in my mind... someone takes a moment to email me and tell me what they like (or more often, what they DON'T like) about this column. That's fine with me. I've never had a problem with anyone voicing an honest opinion.

It seems that some people actually enjoy my ramblings. It's not, it seems, that they agree with everything that I say, but that alternative points of view give them something to think about and even chuckle about on occasion.

And that's really always been my objective... to get people to think about things in a slightly different way. I've written some completely off-the-wall stuff over the past four years (remember my little rant about being prejudiced against stupid people?), and for the most part people have understood that it was just that... off the wall. I've often found that extending things to the point of absurdity can be both educational and amusing. And that's where the fun really begins.

Back in the days before computers were so common, we had time to think things through a little more thoroughly than we do today. There's an old chinese proverb which says that once a word is spoken, even the fastest horse cannot overtake it. That's never been more true than it is today. Not only can we communicate in haste, we can communicate before we even know what we are communicating about!

Most of my little soapbox lectures and ramblings aren't aimed at making people see specific points of view, but to leave them with the impression that there are always other ways of thinking about things. Your point of view on a particular subject may well be different from mine, and we may never agree about it, but it's always good to at least understand that there IS another point of view.

If nothing else, writing this column every week allows me to get myself to think of alternatives. And for that alone, I owe everyone who reads this a debt of thanks. There are very few things that I've had as much fun doing as this column. Hey, I learn new stuff all the time while I'm digging around for posts, and I also coax my tiny little mind into trying "the path not taken" quite often. What could be better than that? Well, yes. A new Atari computer WOULD be better than that, but I guess I'm going to have to settle for the learning and mind-exercise. <Grin>

Well, let's get on with the news, hints, tips, and information from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

Joseph Place asks about an error with MagiC and NEWSie:

"I'm getting this error when exiting Newsie, or sending news: Program returned 68000 error -69. I can run the program and exit fine if I don't dial (I use STing 1.26). If I use the dialer, I get the error every time. Any ideas?"

After some good old-fashioned cyber-detective work, Joseph comes back and posts:

"I found a Newsie archive on James Haslam's site, where he claims to have a troublesome "feature" disabled. I tried his archive, and Newsie is working fine now. Thanks James! Great site by the way!"

Paul Nurminen asks about using a VGA monitor with an ST:

"I know Mario Becroft made an adaptor to allow connecting a standard VGA monitor to an ST. Does anyone know if this is still available? Also, if not, are there any other alternatives? I'm asking for a friend with an STf, who only has a color monitor, and wants to run Cubase.

I've seen "multisync" adaptors from Best Electronics, and WizzTronics, but would these _also_ allow a standard VGA to be used with an ST to utilize HIGH resolution? He doesn't need to use LOW or MEDIUM on a VGA monitor, only HIGH."

Edward Baiz tells Paul:

"From what what I have heard, the cable is still available and only

functions in the HIGH mode. I have hooked up my STe to a VGA monitor using an old piece of hardware called a Video Key. I also needed a video convertor which I bought from Matco."

Barrie at Keychange adds:

"Keychange Music also supply an SVGA to Atari adaptor for hi res only, price 15 sterling."

Ian McDowell asks about emulating a Falcon030:

"Anyone know where I can download a Falcon emulator i know there's one called TOS 104 or something like that, but its main site doesn't have any downloads."

Lonny Pursell tells Ian:

"That one is called TOS404 I think, and it's not released yet far as I know. Try this one instead: http://aranym.sophics.cz/"

Edward Baiz asks:

"Anyone got MagicNet working? I have been fiddling with it, but cannot really tell if it is working or not. Mille Babic wrote a nice article on it, but it is in Swedish. Anyone got an English translation of it?"

Lyndon Amsdon tells Edward that it's...

"Working really well here. Had some worries as my ISP just changed to CHAP but setting my username and password in chap-secrets (put your password in double quotes!) got me back online. Follow the docs, and use devset.prg in the auto folder.

Keep the etc folder on your VFAT partition with long file name support and keep it on same partition as aFTP I think. Put the folder etc on the root too of that drive. If you set up mintnet you should find it easier, less files."

Johnny Farragut asks...

"I've found an Atari 1040 STFM with the Vortex ATOnce Plus installed on it. Does anybody knows how is this activated (a combination of keys, I suppose)?"

Derryck Croker tells Johnny:

"You need the driver disk, which does the necessary. You'll also need a copy of DOS of course.

I have a copy of the disk which I can email to you if you wish, email me with a working address to send it to."

Grzegorz Pawlik asks about a TT video card:

"I have just got a graphic card for my TT. It consists of a sort of VME-ISA interface and a PC (I suppose? It is written "Adax Personal Computer" on it...) graphic card with ET-4000AX chip. Works great and is much faster than the original TT display, I can even *play* DOOM with that!

The problem is that it hangs the computer after a while, mostly when I move GEM windows (in TOS, MagiC, MiNT+N.AES...). The ET-4000AX chip gets very warm, I guess it isn't normal? When I play Doom it does not hang the system, but it switches off the display after some time (Doom does not hang, it still works but without the display). What is wrong, what can I do about it? Placing a fan over the TC-4000AX didn't help, by the way.

Another problem is that the NOVA 2.97 drivers do not work. The card came with its own drivers, which are similar to NOVA (EMULATOR.PRG and STA_VDI.PRG). I cannot use VMG-4000 (a NVDI tool) to make NVDI work with this card, because this program says "Fur den korrektier betrieb auf der grafikkarte, ist ein neuerer XVGA-treiber notig." What does it mean?

What can I do with this card to make it work stable? And work with NVDI 5.03?"

Lyndon Amsdon tells Grzegorz:

"I assume you set up the address OK for registers and memory? I don't know what they're meant to be for the particular adaptor you have. Unless you have some nvdi.inf file already with them in."

Lonny Pursell adds:

"You are aware that you need to install nvdi from a clean system? Meaning if you had NVDI already on there you might want to remove it. It has an ET4000 install option when first installed. Also, when combined with the Nova drivers you might have to disable the screen DRV*.SYS files. On my TT when I had an ET4000 card, this was the case. I don't have the Nova ET4000 anymore though so my memory is fading."

Grzegorz tells Lonny:

"Tried that, but it didn't work at all (black screen when rebooting). Then I used "NOVA-Grafikkarte" option in the installation program, and installed it together with NOVA 2.12 drivers. Now it "works" with NVDI (I'm impressed by the speed and image quality, Papillon 3.04 works great) but it hangs quite often."

Carey Christenson asks Grzegorz:

"Are you using MAGIC with Jinnee 2.5 on this TT???? I had the same problem with my Falcon when I installed my Eclipse with an 4 meg ATI GC!!!!! Inside of Jinnee go to SPECIAL, SETTINGS then DRAGGING. Inside of DRAGGING towards the top there is 2 things that say DRAG TEXT IN REAL-TIME AND DRAG ICONS IN REAL-TIME. With those checked it will cause our GC's

to hang on us for some reason!!!! See if that helps for you!...

I forgot to add with the previous post that if the graphic card is not have a good soldered connection from the power supply that it will give you various problems as well. I don't believe that your power supply is bad. If it turns the computer ON and functions just fine without the GC adding the GC will NOT put that much of a load on the PS!!!!! Guarantee that. Problems I had with my soldered connection to the power supply gave these results!!!!

Computer locking up on bootup, moving icons around very fast on the screen locked up the computer as well as moving windows did the same thing!!!!! Basically anytime the GC had to work to compute and show items on the screen it would hang because it could not draw enough from the poor connection. Check this out and let me know if anything helped."

Grzegorz tells Carey:

"I have now installed NVDI 5 again, selected NOVA Graphic card option and it seem to work (NVDI gives GDOS scalable fonts, and NOVA VDI works as VDI). But the problem is that the card is unstable. Whole system hangs very often. I realised that it does not hang when I use *only* EMULATOR.PRG from NOVA, but that gives 640x400 mono. So maybe it is software bug, not hardware. I have NOVA drivers 2.12 version. I tried NOVA 2.67, but they don't work with that graphic card (I would say they do not work at all...)"

Jean-Luc Ceccoli tells Grzegorz:

"Hmmm... sounds like a PSU weakness. I'm experiencing the same thing with a TT-RAM card : works fine with 4MB, but randomly crashes with 16 MB.

What about trying with an old (i.e. not an ATX) PC PSU, after swapping wires so as to match the TT's one - but check with a voltmeter, for some wires are different from TT's to PC's PSU: usually, PC's yellow matches with TT's blue and your TT would not appreciate that at all."

Well folks, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they are saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->A-ONE Reader Feedback - A-ONE Mailbag!
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Re: A-ONE #04-19

Hello,

My name is Dan de Hulster, an Atarian from Rotterdam, Holland. I enjoy your mag very much, it great that you report about our beloved platform.

Very important developments for the Atari world are going on in Germany at the moment : the Xtos machine and the ATFS. Most of the news in mags and on sites is mostly in German and might escape to the attention of English speaking Atarians.

I feel free to drag your attention on the recent german Atari news and maybe you could mention some details of this news in your mag, for example the results of the Xtos developers meeting in Dresden : there was an extensive interview of Thomas Raukamp with Oliver Kotschi in the german Atari mag "STC", in the may issue, full of details about the current state of the "Coldfire Atari". If you are interested I will send you some info in English from the (german) interview.

Also In the current issue of STC no 6 there is an in depth interview with Ulrich Goessel about the ATFS.

Maybe you could mention too this ATSF, the Atari software Foundation, for example today the Xtos site revealed (in German, the translation might take weeks) a cheap method for transferring money for the membership of the ATFS to the ATFS fund for Atarians outside Germany": via Eurogiro. Much cheaper than via banks or Western Union.

Mentioning these facts to the english readers might contribute extra to the future success of the Coldfire Atari and the ATFS.

Cheers
Dan

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Record Year For Video Game Sales!
"""""""""""""""""""""""""""""""" Hybrid Xbox Project! Retrogaming!
Xbox "Mod" Chip Killed Off!
And much more!

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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Video Games Sales to Top $31 Billion in 2002

The video games industry is on track for a record year in 2002, with global sales projected to increase by 12 percent to $31 billion, a new report by

British research firm Informa Media Group said on Monday.

The popularity of new video game consoles, including Microsoft’s Xbox, Sony’s PlayStation 2 and Nintendo’s GameCube , is contributing to the torrid growth.

Steep competition has forced the three console makers to engage in an aggressive price war in the U.S., Asia and Europe for their 128-bit machines in Europe, stoking record demand.

Combined console and hardware sales will account for $22 billion, or nearly 70 percent of the market in 2002.

In the past decade, home video games sales have soared, creating a market that now rivals film and music as the most popular entertainment past-times.

By year end the three manufacturers will have sold cumulatively 70.4 million so-called next-generation consoles. Sony accounts for 69 percent, with the sale of 48.4 million PlayStation 2 units.

Nintendo is expected to have sold 15.1 million GameCubes with Microsoft selling 6.9 million Xboxes, the study said. GameCube and Xbox made their debut in the U.S. and Japan last year, a year after Sony’s PlayStation 2.

"The assumed launch of new console hardware in 2005 and 2006, and the resultant software boom, will keep the market buoyant," the study reads. "The global market is forecast to peak again in 2008, with revenues of $40 billion."

Conversely, sales of PC games plus hand-held games and hardware are showing signs of weakness. Groups’ sales are expected to dip by a combined 8.5 percent to $8.5 billion this year.

Meanwhile, sales in the nascent categories of online, mobile phone and interactive television games is expected to double this year to $873 million, Informa Media Group said.

The sale of mobile, online and interactive TV games is expected to rise to 54 percent by 2010, the group added.

Microsoft Working on Hybrid Xbox Project

Microsoft Corp. has been quietly working since last fall on a device combining its money-losing Xbox video game console and with its digital video recorder, technology magazine Red Herring reported on Tuesday.

The publication also cited a source as saying internal Microsoft estimates showed that the software giant would lose $750 million on the Xbox game console this fiscal year and $1.1 billion in the next fiscal year, ending June 2003.

That compares with an estimate given to Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates in 1999 that the Xbox project could lose $900 million over eight years, author Dean Takahashi said.

Takahashi recently released a book, "Opening the Xbox," about the early history of the Microsoft console, part of a broader strategy by the

software maker to move away from its reliance on PC software into digital entertainment.

Representatives of Microsoft were not immediately available for comment.

At the Xbox's cost of about $325, Red Herring reported, Microsoft loses at least $150 on each box, which retails for $199 but is sold wholesale to stores for $175.

That $325 cost-of-goods will come down to $225 eventually, the magazine said, quoting an unnamed source, though it will likely take five years.

By comparison, the article said competitors Sony Corp. and Nintendo Co. Ltd. were expected to lower the costs of their competing PlayStation 2 and GameCube, respectively, much faster, Red Herring said.

Meanwhile, Microsoft engineers have been at work for about nine months on a project combining the company's UltimateTV recorder with the Xbox, Red Herring said.

The magazine cited speculation that such a combined machine could be launched next year for a price of around $500, which factors in the added costs of a larger hard drive and TV tuning equipment.

The Xbox, PS2 and GameCube are competing for share in a global game market that is expected to top $30 billion in hardware and software sales this year.

All three companies make losses on their hardware products, but make up those losses with sales of higher-margin software.

THQ to Bring Microsoft Games to Game Boy Advance

Interactive game publisher THQ Inc. on Tuesday said it has signed a deal with Microsoft Corp. to bring some of Microsoft's popular Xbox video games to the Game Boy Advance portable device.

Under the exclusive arrangement, THQ will publish several of Microsoft Game Studios' Xbox and personal computer titles on Nintendo Co. Ltd.'s handheld Game Boy Advance system, including "Oddworld: Munch's Oddysee" and "Monster Truck Madness 2.0."

THQ and Microsoft also agreed to work together to develop additional releases. Financial details of the agreement were not disclosed.

"We have a first call on any intellectual property that Microsoft does an Xbox or a PC game for," Brian Farrell, the chief executive of THQ, told Reuters, adding that the deal has been in the works for nearly a year.

Under the deal, THQ will be able to choose Microsoft games until 2004 and publish versions of them through 2008.

Microsoft and Nintendo compete head-to-head in the console market. The Xbox made its debut last Nov. 15, three days before Nintendo's latest console, the GameCube.

Both companies are battling industry leader Sony Corp. for share in a

global gaming market expected to top $30 billion in sales this year, including more than $10 billion in hardware and software sales in the United States alone.

However, the two sides do not compete in the handheld market, which Nintendo has dominated for more than 10 years.

There has been some speculation in past that Microsoft might consider a handheld platform of its own some day, though Farrell said this deal is not a reflection on any such plans that might exist.

"I think it’s safe to say there’s probably not anything in the near term," he said.

Representatives for Microsoft and Nintendo were not immediately available for comment.

"I have not yet spoken with Nintendo but we think they’re going to be very excited about it because it extends their platform too," Farrell said.

Xbox ’Mod’ Chip Gets Killed Off

One of the companies making Xbox "mod chips"--add-on components that modify the game machine so it can run illegally copied discs and homemade software--has gone out of business, possibly because of legal pressure from Microsoft.

The information site for Enigmah-X, the second Xbox mod chip to go into commercial circulation, was replaced late Tuesday with a brief message: "After speaking to lawyers we feel that we must not do this project anymore. There are many other chips and methods for guys to play with anyway so have fun and good luck to everyone out there."

Enigmah and Microsoft representatives did not respond to repeated requests for comment. However, in May, shortly after the first Xbox mod chip went on sale, a Microsoft representative said the company was investigating legal avenues for shutting down such operations.

Schelley Olhava, gaming analyst for research firm IDC, said pirated games running on an altered Xbox are unlikely to have a significant effect on sales of legitimate games. Software and licensing revenue are critical for Microsoft to eventually make money off the heavily subsidized Xbox hardware.

"Sony has been dealing with mod chips for the PlayStation 2 for years," Olhava said. "They’re probably losing some game sales, but I’ve never heard Sony raise that as a major concern."

Olhava said the complexity of installing mod chips makes them a niche phenomenon. Some of the chips require as many as 30 precise soldering connections to the game console’s main circuit board.

"There are always going to be hobbyists who try to figure out things to do that the unit wasn’t designed to do," Olhava said. "But the vast majority of people are just going to play games. They don’t have the interest, the skills, the time to try and make it do tricks."

While mod chips allow illegally copied games to run on the Xbox, hackers say their interests fall on the right side of the law. Most hacker sites forbid distribution or discussion of illegally copied games, instead focusing on using mod chips to run homebrew software on the Xbox.

An early version of an Xbox media player is in circulation, as is a beta release of an Xbox version of MAME, a popular piece of "emulator" software that allows PCs and other systems to run old arcade games such as "Pac Man" and "Galaxian."

One other Xbox mod chip, the Xtender, is in wide circulation now, although several other groups are reportedly working on their own designs, including a German company working on a chip that supposedly would be much easier to install.

Wanna Play? Old Games Get New Life

The retro video game craze is taking another step back in time.

A programmer and self-avowed fan of classic video games has created software for Pocket PC and Palm handhelds that faithfully re-creates a breed of inexpensive handheld electronic games made popular by Mattel in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

In creating LEDhead, software programmer Peter Hirschberg has managed to capture much of the essence of the simple games, which consisted of a few blinking light-emitting diodes (LEDs) moving around a painted screen.

The software, when run on a $600 Compaq iPaq, does a good job capturing the low-tech environment of the games, complete with blinking lights and high-pitched sound effects. At the time, such handheld games sold for around $20 and could be powered by a single 9-volt battery.

Each game offered a simplistic take on a particular sport such as basketball, soccer and football. Titles along other themes included "Space Alert" and "Sub Chase." Hirschberg offers 11 of the games with LEDhead software.

According to a poll on the Web site, the two versions of football are by far the most popular, with baseball a distant third.

Hirschberg said the response from fans of the games has been quite emotional.

"I get e-mails daily from people nearly in tears they are so happy to be able to play these games again," Hirschberg said in an e-mail.

The effort to bring back the Mattel games is part of a larger trend of using today’s technology to play yesterday’s games. Another Web site offers PC-based simulations of other handheld games, while Motorola is looking to re-create classic Atari video games for its cell phones.

Stand-up arcade games such as Pong and Pac-Man have already enjoyed a renaissance with a number of imitations. Meanwhile, the original stand-up consoles serve as a status symbol at underground music spots and trendy art shows.

Hirschberg said he was inspired after buying his favorite childhood game, "Space Alert," on eBay.

"Being a programmer, I found that I couldn't help myself writinglittle code routines in my head for the game logic," he said. "So I wrote a little program that emulated the logic just sort of as a brain teaser exercise."

One game turned into several, and Hirschberg eventually decided to consolidate all the games into a single program.

"That gave me the idea of porting to handheld devices," he said. "I thought the synergy of having these old handheld games on a modern-day handheld device about the same size...It was just too cool to pass up."

To avoid stepping on any toes with LEDhead, Hirschberg spent hours writing programs that closely match the original games, without using any of the original code. "LEDhead uses simple but extremely clever imitation to ensure excruciating faithfulness to the games you grew up with," Hirschberg proclaims on his Web site.

LEDhead is being offered free, although Hirschberg is accepting donations. For those without a handheld, Hirschberg offers a Windows version.

But with Xbox, PlayStation and dozens of realistic gaming worlds to choose from, why would gaming fans want to go back in time?

"Without an effort to preserve these memorable games, most or all of them would eventually fade into obscurity," Hirschberg said on his Web site. "Many already have. It is my endeavor to ensure these games are remembered into the future as the culturally significant icons I believe they represent."

And while LEDhead is free, investment banker Tom Taulli says there is money to be made by looking in technology's rearview mirror.

"Many who played video games in the 1970s are now - hopefully - professionals who have a sense of nostalgia," said Taulli, who works for NetCap Ventures. "They remember the fun of playing Pong and Pac-Man and want to do it again, but perhaps this time on a mobile device."

Taulli said the retro trend goes beyond tech.

Volkswagen "has been bringing back its classic cars from the 1960s, and they are selling like hot cakes," he said. "I think this is a great strategy, especially when marketing and branding (new products) can be very expensive."

Popular Online Game Site Spread Nimda Virus

Some video game players got a nasty surprise this week when they downloaded software from a popular online gaming site -- the Nimda computer virus.

The installer for GameSpy Arcade 1.09, the main file exchange and gaming software of GameSpy.com, available from sites like CNET Networks Inc.'s Download.com service, was infected with the Nimda virus twice this week, GameSpy Chief Executive Mark Surfas told Reuters.

Surfas said the virus infected one of their download servers for two hours on Tuesday and five hours Wednesday night, while they were performing routine service.

"We were doing some maintenance and we let our guard down," he said, adding that the company, which provides thousands of downloads every day, has never had a similar incident.

"This registers with us as a serious, serious error," he said. "We're pretty upset about it. This is not cool."

Surfas said a total of 3,100 infected files were served, and the company is in the process of notifying everyone who got an infected file and pointing them to free anti-virus tools that will disinfect their systems.

He also said the company has not received any reports of user suffering any damage from contracting the virus.

GameSpy.com is operated by GameSpy Industries of Irvine, California, which is best-known among gamers for providing the back-end infrastructure, like software and servers, to power popular online games like "Soldier of Fortune" and "Medal of Honor."

Two weeks ago, Microsoft Corp. revealed that the Korean-language version of its software for development of online services was also infected with the Nimda virus, though the company said the virus was dormant and in no danger of infecting anyone's computer.

Nimda, which first struck in September of last year, is estimated to have cost up to $500 million as corporations cleaned up their networks.

Most anti-virus software programs have had the ability to detect and eliminate Nimda since the outbreak.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

New Pentium 4-M Breaks 2GHz Barrier

Intel broke through the 2GHz barrier for notebook PCs on Monday with the launch of a new Pentium 4-M chip.

The 2GHz chip, which is accompanied by a 1.9GHz Pentium 4-M and a handful of mobile Celerons, meets Intel's internal target for shipping a 2GHz mobile chip by midyear.

Although the PC market overall has lurched into the doldrums again, notebooks have fared better than desktops in a variety of markets for some time.

Notebook shipments are expected to grow 17 percent year over year from 2001 to 2002, said Anand Chandrasekher, vice president and general manager of Intel's Mobile Platforms Group, citing a study from Gartner.

The new Pentium 4-M and Celeron chips will be offered in notebooks issued by a slew of PC makers on Monday. Starting prices for the new machines from companies such as Dell Computer and Hewlett-Packard will range from $1,299 for a 1.33GHz Celeron machine to about $2,000 for a 2GHz notebook, Intel representatives said.

Dell Computer, Hewlett-Packard and Toshiba were among the companies that announced new notebooks Monday.

Dell is offering the new Pentium 4 chips in three notebooks, including its Inspiron 8200. The machine, when fitted with the 2GHz chip, a 15-inch screen, 256MB of RAM, a 30GB hard drive and a combination CD-rewritable/DVD drive sells for about $2,300.

Toshiba's Satellite Pro 6100 will include the 2GHz chip, a 15-inch display, 512MB of RAM, a 60GB hard drive and a CD-RW/DVD combination drive for $2,699, the company said.

Meanwhile, HP will offer several Compaq Evo notebooks with the new Pentium 4-M chips. Its Evo N610c will include a 1.9GHz Pentium 4-M processor and a 14.1-inch screen, 128MB of RAM and a 20GB hard drive for a starting price of $2,149, the company said.

HP is also offering a Compaq Presario 1500 notebook with the new 1.4GHz mobile Celeron chip. When configured with the 1.4GHz chip, a 14.1-inch screen, 128MB of RAM, a 20GB hard drive and a CD-RW/DVD combination drive, the machine sells for $1,324, according to HP's Web site.

The Pentium 4-M's 2GHz achievement marks one of Intel's fastest new-processor leaps. The Pentium 4-M moved from 1.7GHz at its introduction to 2GHz in just three months. It took the desktop Pentium 4 several quarters to make the same journey.

Originally, Intel was expected to offer a 2GHz Pentium 4-M for notebooks later this year, but the company moved up that projection during an April analysts meeting at which Paul Otellini, Intel's president and chief operating officer, announced the midyear goal.

The chipmaker faced several obstacles in making the transition to the Pentium 4-M from its Pentium III-M precursor. The first notebooks to use the chip were relatively expensive, priced at $2,500 or more. This limited the chip's adoption early on, analysts said, and some manufacturers opted to build products with Pentium 4 desktop chips instead of the mobile variant to hold prices down.

Intel moved quickly to remedy the situation, introducing two new lower-clock-speed, lower-priced chips in April. Those chips run at 1.5GHz and 1.6GHz. The company then dropped prices of the Pentium 4-M chips to further spur demand.

Now, with the chip more established, Intel will increase the clock speed of the Pentium 4-M more aggressively. It will has also increased the speeds of its mobile Celeron chips from 1.2GHz.

If Intel follows a path similar to the one it took with its desktop chips,

the mobile chip’s clock speed will jump to 2.2GHz in the fourth quarter and probably 2.4GHz in the first quarter of 2003, sources familiar with the company’s plans said.

Meanwhile, the new 1.9GHz and 2GHz chips list for $401 and $637, respectively. The 1.33GHz, 1.4GHz and 1.5GHz chips will list for $134, $149 and $170, the company said.

Napster Approved for $5.1M Loan

Napster Inc., which filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection early this month, won final approval Tuesday of a $5.13 million debtor-in-possession agreement with Bertelsmann AG, its prospective purchaser.

Napster, which stirred controversy as the provider of a free Internet music service, will use $4 million of the loan to fund business operations.

The remaining $1.13 million will fund a key employee retention plan, the terms of which were also approved Tuesday.

The loan includes an 8 percent interest rate and expires the earliest of Aug. 30, the completion of the sale, or the termination of the sale agreement.

The loan also includes $250,000 to cover administrative expenses incurred during the Chapter 11 case.

Napster was unable to win approval of bid procedures in connection with the proposed sale of substantially all of its assets to Bertelsmann in a deal valued at $92 million. As a result, attorneys for Bertelsmann said they may not be able to go through with the sale.

Chief Judge Peter J. Walsh of the U.S. Bankruptcy Court in Wilmington said he was "not prepared" to approve the bid procedures because the proposed sale process was too short.

Bertelsmann has agreed to acquire Napster’s assets for $8 million in cash plus the elimination of its alleged $83 million secured claim.

The purchaser increased its bid to $9 million in cash, the elimination of the secured claim, and any unused amounts under the DIP agreement after negotiations with Napster’s committee of unsecured creditors.

Under its asset purchase agreement with Bertelsmann, Napster must obtain a court order approving the sale by the end of July.

The debtor requested a sale hearing be held on July 30 to accommodate that provision.

The office of the U.S. Trustee and several recording companies which are litigating a copyright case against Napster they think could result in between $250 million and $50 billion in claims balked at the time frame, saying it didn’t provide ample time to investigate Bertelsmann’s alleged secured claim.

Judge Walsh agreed and said he would require a sale hearing take place in at least 60 days.

Representatives for Bertelsmann said they couldn’t agree to the lengthened sale process and Napster requested a recess to negotiate the matter with the prospective purchaser.

Napster has said Bertelsmann is its only hope for a sale in Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

If the sale is approved, Napster expects having as much as $10.3 million in cash to go to unsecured creditors. The total amount of unsecured claims asserted against the estate is $11 million, meaning unsecured creditors would receive better than 93 percent of their claims if Napster is successful in winning the copyright litigation.

Napster filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection on June 3, listing assets of $7.9 million and liabilities of $101 million, as of April 30.

File-swapping Start-ups Muddy Legal Issues

Despite the music industry’s legal victory last year over free song-swapping service Napster, a new crop of exchanges sprang up.

The services, also under assault from record labels and Hollywood studios, have become even more widespread than Napster. And, they’ve added movies, software, photographs and games to what can be downloaded for free.

But lawsuits are starting to slow the march of new file-swapping sites. Last week, Audiogalaxy, a popular music-sharing site, removed most of its music files for download as part of an out-of-court settlement reached with the recording and music industries.

What ultimately happens with the sector may determine whether consumers can continue to snare free songs off the Web unabated -- or whether the music industry can at least slow the growth of networks that make that possible.

"We don’t want to live in a world where piracy is rampant, but we don’t want to live in a world where there’s absolute control by corporations," says Justin Hughes, an expert on intellectual property and Internet law at UCLA.

The music industry’s own paid subscription services have foundered, at least partly because of the free offerings.

In the biggest lawsuit, music and movie studios are suing three of the largest file-swapping services -- KaZaA, Morpheus and Grokster -- in federal court in Los Angeles. Unlike Napster, the new services are profitable, or nearly so, thanks to advertising sales.

They say they should be treated differently by the courts because, unlike Napster, they have no central server that keeps an index of available songs.

Rather, users’ PCs individually search the computers of other members until they find the song they want to copy.

As a result, the start-ups say, they can neither shut down the exchanges

nor filter out copyrighted songs from those by new artists who encourage free downloading.

"KaZaA has no ability to know what's going on or control" it, says KaZaA lawyer Judy Jennison. "The network is generated by end users," says Fred von Lohmann, attorney for the Electronic Frontier Foundation, which represents Morpheus. "It operates completely independently of the companies."

That argument relies on the Supreme Court's 1984 landmark ruling that Sony was not liable if some of its VCR customers made illegal copies of movies. After all, many consumers were simply taping shows for their own use.

But the record industry says the companies can exercise control: They simply assign the task of song indexing to the PCs of select members with broadband lines.

"They want to build a business off of our music, and now they want to split hairs in their defense," says Matt Oppenheim, senior vice president of the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA).

Proof, he says, is that KaZaA effectively shut down the Morpheus network by withholding a software upgrade when the firms had a financial dispute in March. KaZaA licenses its file-sharing technology to Morpheus and Grokster.

Several other prominent U.S. cases will also likely turn on the question of whether the services can govern their users:

* In its settlement, Audiogalaxy agreed to stop the unauthorized sharing of music -- meaning many songs on its site were no longer accessible. Financial terms were not disclosed.

Music labels and publishers last month sued Audiogalaxy, which is a Napsterlike service that does operate a central hub.

The RIAA had shelved the lawsuit for more than a year because Audiogalaxy agreed to screen out copyrighted songs. But "the firm's sieve-like filter" had been totally ineffective, Oppenheim says.

* Madster, formerly called Aimster, which piggybacks on America Online's instant-messaging service to let users share music and video files, is being sued by music labels and Hollywood studios.

The files pass through a central server but cannot be monitored because they're encrypted, says Madster lawyer David Boies.

"You could decrypt it and search it," Boies says. "But the more important policy question is whether the (service) has the right to open people's mail and censor it. We don't think they do."

Overseas cases have been mixed. A Dutch court said KaZaA users, not the service, violated copyright laws. But a Tokyo court ruled against a music exchange run by MMO Japan; that system was server-based.

Different rules, in fact, may emerge in different countries. For now, preventing only some countries from accessing a Web service "doesn't really work," says von Lohmann. It also may be tough to enforce a court order when the defendant is based overseas. KaZaA is in the Netherlands; Grokster, the West Indies.

Another challenge for the labels, even if they win in court, is that technologies can easily be transferred to new entities.

KaZaA is shutting down and sold its technology to Sharman Networks. It’s unclear whether a ruling against KaZaA would apply to Sharman, RIAA’s Oppenheim concedes.

And lawsuits won’t threaten Gnutella, a music-trading technology with no central hub. That system, however, is more cumbersome.

"If you close one network, others are ready to take its place," says Matt Bailey of Redshift Research. "But (courts) may disrupt (file-sharing) and slow its growth."

Net Bigwigs Label Sites’ Content

Trying to do their part to make the Web more child-friendly, technology heavyweights including America Online, Microsoft and Yahoo say they’ve labeled almost every page on their sites with an updated content-assessment system.

Living up to a commitment they made in October, the companies announced that they’ve labeled 93 percent of their pages in accordance with the Internet Content Rating Association (ICRA), a voluntary system that seeks to create a content-neutral guide for parents and children. The ICRA is an international nonprofit group that aims to balance efforts to protect children online while respecting free speech.

The companies plan to unveil their ICRA-related plans at an event Tuesday at the Tech Museum in San Jose, Calif. To participate in the plan, Web site operators fill out a questionnaire about material including sexual, violent and tobacco-related content.

A metatag, or label, is then generated that lists the material, although it does not include a value judgment or rating of the site. Browsers and blocking programs that include ICRA’s filtering technology can then use the information to determine whether a site meets a parent’s criteria. The organization also unveiled a new ICRA filter.

The move gives more teeth to the ICRA program. Because it is voluntary, the program can only be effective if it is used by a large number of sites. The companies characterized their efforts as a key component in their attempts to gain or maintain customer trust.

"As the Internet becomes increasingly essential in the lives of consumers, it is important that we focus on providing tools for families, like the ICRA label, to create the best experience on the Web," Yahoo Vice President Srinija Srinivasan said in a statement.

In May, the National Academy of Sciences released a report saying that technology is only one part of a comprehensive effort needed to protect children online. Other components include parental guidance and education campaigns.

ICRA executives cited that report, saying their product can be part of the plan.

"While technology plays a role in protecting children online, ICRA recognizes that technology cannot do the job alone. To ensure a rewarding yet safe Internet experience, parents must understand the risks and rewards of Internet use, and work with their children to establish ’ground rules’ for access," Mary Lou Kenny, director of ICRA North America, said in a statement.

On Tuesday, ICRA also said it will seek funding for a national education campaign to help create a safer Internet.

House OKs Rewritten Internet Child-Porn Ban

Barely two months after the U.S. Supreme Court struck down a ban on "virtual" child pornography, the House of Representatives on Tuesday passed another attempt to update child-porn laws for the Internet age.

The House passed 413-8 a bill that would outlaw pornographic digital images of children, unless they were proven to be computer-generated simulations that did not portray actual underage sex.

The Supreme Court struck down a similar law on free-speech grounds in April, saying it was too broadly written and could outlaw mainstream films like "Traffic" and "Romeo and Juliet" that use adult actors to portray teenage sex.

Backers said a rewritten bill was necessary to effectively prosecute the child-pornography trade, which has migrated to the Internet over the past several years.

Without a virtual-porn ban, prosecutors must prove that child pornography seized from Web sites and computer hard drives portrays actual children, a difficult proposition once a picture has been scanned into a computer and passed around the Internet, said bill sponsor Rep. Lamar Smith, a Texas Republican.

The Supreme Court’s decision has made existing child-porn cases harder to prosecute and could throw previous convictions in jeopardy, others said.

"With every passing day another pedophile escapes prosecution because of the flawed ruling of this high court," said Florida Republican Rep. Mark Foley, a bill co-sponsor.

But Rep. Bobby Scott, a Virginia Democrat, said Congress was wasting its time with another effort that would not survive a courtroom challenge.

"This bill just reiterates the mistakes in the original legislation," Scott said.

The Bush administration issued a statement supporting the bill’s passage, saying it "would be an important step in protecting children from abuse by ensuring effective child pornography prosecutions."

The issue now must be taken up by the Senate, where similar but separate bills have been introduced by Utah Republican Sen. Orrin Hatch and Missouri Democratic Sen. Jean Carnahan. A hearing is scheduled in the Judiciary Committee in the summer, a Carnahan spokesman said.

Congress has so far had little success writing laws that limit pornography on the Internet that do not infringe on free-speech rights. Federal courts have struck down three previous attempts to regulate online smut on First Amendment grounds.

The rewritten bill, drafted by the Justice Department in response to the Supreme Court's ruling, applies only to computer images that are "indistinguishable" from child pornography, not just material that "appears to be" child porn. It does not apply to mainstream movies, cartoons, drawings or other works that are not realistic digital images.

Pornography involving prepubescent children would be outlawed entirely, "virtual" or not.

The bill would flip the burden of proof so that the defendant would be required to prove that the image was a computer-generated fake, rather than requiring prosecutors to prove that it involved real, identifiable children.

Bill sponsors said they were confident that their new bill would pass judicial review, and that without such an "affirmative defense" they would be incapable of prosecuting digital child pornography.

But Scott and Rep. Jerry Nadler, a New York Republican, said most child pornography could be prosecuted under existing obscenity laws. The bill still could be struck down on First Amendment grounds because it would threaten documentary filmmakers, therapists and others who use computer images for legitimate purposes, they said.

"The government may not suppress lawful speech to suppress unlawful speech," Nadler said.

The House also approved 409-3 a bill that would allow judges to require lifetime monitoring of sex offenders after they serve their prison terms.

PC Recycling Loses Momentum

Two efforts to address electronics recycling sputtered this week, as a California bill went back to the drawing board and a government-industry summit made little or no progress.

The developments were the latest in a struggle to address the growing volume of so-called e-waste as corporations and consumers discard outmoded PCs, TV sets, cell phones and other devices. A central question in the debate over how best to handle the castoffs is cost: What level of fees might be necessary, at what point in a product's life cycle, and who would pay them?

The bill, S.B. 1523, which targets CRT (cathode ray tube) monitors, moved forward from the California Assembly's natural resources committee but with the details stripped out, largely because of opposition from the high-tech industry. One of those details called for consumers to pay a fee of up to $30 when buying a CRT monitor in the state. The money would be earmarked for recycling programs.

Whether the provisions remain stripped out depends on what happens between

now and the bill’s appearance before the Assembly’s appropriations committee later this summer. The bill’s author, Sen. Byron Sher, and other interested parties are expected to use the time to come up with language that’s more palatable to electronics makers. Otherwise, the original language would be reinstated.

"We’re encouraged that the legislators have recognized what that legislation in its current form could do to companies and to California’s economy," said Kerry Fennelly, a spokeswoman for the Electronic Industries Alliance (EIA). A recent EIA-backed study suggested that consumers would balk at buying a new PC or other consumer-electronics products if recycling fees of as little as $5 were added to the purchase price.

Aside from damaging the state’s economy, the EIA argued, the bill is unfair to California-based companies. The group referred to the fees called for in the bill as a "tech tax" that unfairly targets California businesses by failing to address sales of electronic devices over the Internet and through catalogs. The same EIA-backed study claimed that consumers would probably buy their electronic products online, even with the shipping and handling costs involved, to avoid paying a recycling fee at a retail store.

The citizen sponsor of the bill said that although legislators were largely supportive of the fee provision, they had no desire to put the state’s businesses at risk or to anger consumers. He also took issue with the industry’s characterization.

"It’s very clear that what we’re talking about is a fee, not a tax," said Mark Murray, executive director of the organization Californians Against Waste. "Fees are under different rules. The state has the right to assess fees."

As for the sticky matter of out-of-state sellers, those details still need to be worked out in the coming weeks. "It’s not a legal question but one of practicality: What tools can the state of California use to compel companies without a presence in the state" to pay the fees, Murray said.

Environmental groups and some European governments think manufacturers should pick up the multimillion-dollar tab for recycling. The debate in the United States has focused on involving consumers, with either a front-end fee at the point of sale or an end-of-life fee on a device’s disposal.

At a meeting this week of the National Electronic Product Stewardship Initiative (NEPSI) in Minneapolis, discussion of a national recycling system financed by front-end fees slipped out of gear and left some participants wondering what comes next.

Government representatives participating in the group voiced frustration about the lack of commitment by the electronics industry and retailers to construct a pact that would meet the needs of state and local agencies in handling e-waste. Electronics makers, meanwhile, say that although they don’t like the idea of state-by-state legislation, it’s too early to know the most effective way to build a comprehensive system.

"One difficulty we see there is predicting what’s going to happen three years down the road," said Bryant Hilton, a spokesman for Dell Computer, which is observing only the NEPSI talks. "There may well be an option that’s a whole lot cheaper by that time."

Coordinated by the Center for Clean Products and Clean Technologies at the University of Tennessee, NEPSI brings together representatives from state and local governments, manufacturers, retailers, recyclers and environmental groups. It’s a voluntary organization, with its success depending on all the involved parties reaching a consensus. But though it has no real legislative power - indeed, some lawmakers aren’t even aware it exists - California’s legislators are monitoring the group’s progress. Given the current standoff, though, that progress looks to be slow at best, and the prospects have become dimmer for NEPSI to reach an accord by its scheduled deadline of September.

"There was not the sense that we were imminent in reaching an agreement," said Scott Cassell, director of the Product Stewardship Institute at the University of Massachusetts in Lowell. "No one appears interested in leaving the table. However, we’re still groping for reasons that we’re at the table."

Software Errors Cost Billions

Software bugs are not just annoying or inconvenient. They’re expensive.

According to a study by the U.S. Department of Commerce’s National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), the bugs and glitches cost the U.S. economy about $59.5 billion a year.

"The impact of software errors is enormous because virtually every business in the United States now depends on software for the development, production, distribution, and after-sales support of products and services," NIST Director Arden Bement said in a statement on Friday.

Software users contribute about half the problem, while developers and vendors are to blame for the rest, the study said. The study also found that better testing could expose the bugs and remove bugs at the early development stage could reduce about $22.2 billion of the cost.

"Currently, over half of all errors are not found until ’downstream’ in the development process or during post-sale software use," the study said.

The study, conducted by the Research Triangle Institute in North Carolina and the software industry was conducted to identify and assess technical needs to improve software-testing capabilities.

Software is error-ridden, in part because of the complexity inherent in millions of lines of code. About 80 percent of the cost of developing software programs goes to identifying and correcting defects. Yet, few products of any type other than software are shipped with such high levels of errors, the study found.

Other factors contributing the problem include marketing strategies, limited liability by software vendors, and decreasing returns on testing and debugging, according to the study.

In January, the National Academy of Sciences a report urging lawmakers to consider adopting legislation to hold software vendors liable for security breaches.

If software makers were held liable, the cost to consumers would rise

dramatically, said Marc E. Brown, a partner at the Los Angeles law firm of McDermott, Will & Emery.

However, Europe already has begun addressing the issue.

A Dutch judge in September convicted Exact Holding of malpractice for selling buggy software, rejecting the argument that early versions of software are traditionally unstable.

Publishers Sue Over Pop-Up Ads

Complaining of parasitical behavior, some of the nation’s largest news publishers are suing Internet advertising company Gator Corp. over software that triggers pop-up ads when surfers visit their Web sites.

"We make all the investment to gather and collect news and set up an attractive Web site," Terence Ross, an attorney for the publishers, said Friday. "Gator, without making any equivalent investment, reaps the profits."

The lawsuit was filed this week in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, Va., by a group that includes parent companies of The New York Times, USA Today, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post, as well as the digital arms of Knight Ridder and Conde Nast.

In it, the publishers call Gator "a parasite on the Web that free rides on the content of others." They seek an injunction and unspecified damages.

Gator, based in Redwood City, Calif., runs an ad network that claims 22 million active users and 400 advertisers.

Internet users get Gator advertising software when they install a separate product for filling out online forms and remembering passwords.

Gator also comes hitched with free software from other companies, including games and file-sharing programs.

As users surf the Web, Gator runs in the background and delivers advertisements on top of what the surfer would normally get at a site.

Though the Gator ads are marked "GAIN" for Gator Advertising and Information Network many consumers won’t know the difference and will instead blame the site for an unpleasant experience, Ross said.

He acknowledges that some of the publishers, including the Times, do deliver pop-up ads, but he said their timing, frequency and nature are typically controlled.

"What if in a story covering the tragic event of Sept. 11, Gator suddenly popped up an advertising for a flight training school?" Ross said. "That would be wholly inappropriate."

In some cases, the lawsuit charges, Gator’s ads are for services that compete with the publishers’ for example, a Travelocity.com ad appears while surfing CondeNet’s concierge.com. Both provide travel-related services.

In a statement, Gator pledged to vigorously defend the lawsuit. To Gator, its pop-up windows are no different than what happens when a user runs instant messaging, e-mail or other programs in separate windows while surfing a Web site.

"While we understand why these publishers of advertising-supported Web sites feel threatened by us, we are certain that being a strong and thriving competitor is not illegal," said Jeff McFadden, the company's chief executive.

In response to questions via e-mail, McFadden said Gator may file its own lawsuit seeking a declaratory judgment that consumers have the right to decide what is displayed on their computer screens and that Gator's practices constitute lawful competition.

Responding to the publishers' claims of copyright and trademark infringements, Gator said its practices do not involve copying of the publishers' site or using their trademarks.

But Ross said Gator could be held liable because ads block copyrighted material and hence its presentation and could confuse visitors into thinking the pitches were authorized by the Web site.

Gator's advertising practices have come under fire before.

Last year, the Interactive Advertising Bureau threatened to file a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission over Gator's selling of ads that block out the ads displayed on other Web sites. Gator responded with a federal suit against the trade group. Gator ultimately agreed to stop the practice.

Yahoo Collecting Fees on Old Auctions

Attention former Yahoo auction sellers: Your bills are coming due.

Yahoo is billing sellers for small charges that have been sitting around for months or years. The company formerly let charges accrue until they hit a certain threshold but is now sending bills for charges as low as 5 cents.

"The Yahoo Auctions billing systems have recently been upgraded. As a result, your account has been made current and you may have been charged for any previously uncollected balances you accumulated by submitting or featuring auctions on Yahoo," the company said in a note to sellers who had inquired about the charges.

Yahoo began notifying sellers last week and charging their credit cards for the outstanding charges, company spokeswoman Nancy Evars said. Evars declined to say how many sellers were affected. She didn't know the total amount of outstanding charges available but said "it wasn't a huge amount of money."

"This is basically to get all of our billing up to speed and current," she said.

Yahoo initiated listing fees on its auction site last year, but the company had previously charged sellers to feature their items or give them

more prominent display. Upset over the new fees, many sellers abandoned the site last year, and the number of listings on Yahoo Auctions plummeted.

Faced with declining ad revenue, Yahoo has been trying to turn many of its free features into paid services over the last 18 months. The auction site was one of the first attempts at creating a fee-based service from a formerly free one. More recently, the company has begun to charge for data storage and for forwarding e-mail.

Although the company billed auction sellers for even minimal outstanding charges, they may not see such small bills in the future. The company will continue to allow charges to accumulate until they reach a certain amount, Evars said. However, the company has decreased that threshold, she said. Evars declined to say what amount of charges would trigger a bill.

One Yahoo user who wrote to News.com said she receive a bill from Yahoo even though she hadn’t sold anything on the site in at least a year and a half. She said she was frustrated that the company waited this long to bill her.

"What is frustrating (is) that I may no longer have any records to support that my bill was paid, if I ever owed them anything," the user wrote. "This was a long, long time ago."

The Dark Side of eBay

To say that eBay has a devoted following is like saying the Beatles were liked by some teenage girls. While true, the statement does not reflect the full scope of fans’ zeal. Analysts love the company, competitors fear its power, and users flock in ever-greater numbers to its homespun marketplace.

But the adoration is not universal. Recurrent complaints of fraud, shoddy bidding practices, and poor search engine capability and customer service have tarnished eBay’s sheen in the minds of some consumers.

For example, some users question whether the company’s "hard close" auction method -- where a bidder can leap in at the last moment -- is a fair way to handle bidding.

Indeed, even as eBay is lauded by observers of e-commerce, it also is trying to do damage control to keep its reputation clean.

In a push to attract more retail sellers, eBay recently has begun to prominently feature retailers who are selling through its site. The company’s increased attention to big companies was not received well by some longtime users.

But Forrester analyst Carrie Johnson told the E-Commerce Times that eBay may have to put up with the grumbling if it wants to grow.

"They need to draw retailers in because they need more mainstream buyers," she said. "Then, consumers who were hesitant to bid will get over their fears. So, there’s definitely a network effect to having retailers on board."

Although eBay grew organically, building a site that now boasts more than

46 million registered users, the auction giant will need to do more going forward. Johnson suggested that eBay will have to start reeling in even more big players.

"Right now, a few more individuals a day are joining," she said. "But to grow, they need to attract large groups of folks. You can't do that without signing up big retailers."

Most of the individuals who make up eBay's current community seem content with the way the company operates, but a vocal minority has expressed unhappiness about the larger retailers that have become part of eBay's focus.

However, eBay spokesperson Kevin Pursglove told the E-Commerce Times that large retailers represent only a small percentage of all eBay sellers - and are expected to remain a minority.

"While there has been a good deal of attention focused on the national brands, they presently account for only 2 or 3 percent of gross merchandise sales on the site," Pursglove said.

"[Though] eBay is optimistic about the potential of larger businesses participating in the eBay marketplace, we believe that such businesses would account for no more than 10 to 12 percent of total GMS," he added.

"The great majority of items sold on the site will continue to be [sold] by small to medium-sized business and sole proprietorships."

At a recent meeting with a dozen disgruntled customers, eBay director of marketing Bill Cobb admitted that communication between the company and its users is spotty, and added that a better way will be devised soon.

Currently, customer service representatives rarely answer complaints or queries posted to the site's message boards, leaving other auction-goers to address concerns.

And when an eBay reply is offered, it is often automated or canned.

However, Pursglove said, "we keep a constant eye on the boards and discussion groups. Meg and the senior management team receive a daily summary of issues that have been addressed on the boards."

Fraud is the most frequent charge against the auction giant, and some analysts say they believe eBay may never be able to solve this problem.

"It's the problem with getting too big too fast," Johnson said. "Policing ends up being the job of community members rather than eBay itself. That leaves the company open to lawsuits."

But according to Pursglove, eBay is fighting the dark side. He said the company's data show that in the first quarter of this year, "less than 1/100 of 1 percent of all the listings on eBay resulted in a confirmed case of fraud.

"Most importantly, cases are getting prosecuted," Pursglove added. "Dozens of Internet criminals are going to jail, paying fines and returning money to victims in state and federal cases across the country and around the world. Each successful prosecution sends an important message that the law does apply on the Internet and particularly on eBay."

"They're working on it, but it's a huge challenge," Forrester's Johnson noted. "It's why they haven't convinced more conventional companies to sell their goods through eBay."

Despite grousing on the part of some users, however, affection for eBay is still overwhelming.

Jared Blank, an analyst at Jupiter Media Metrix, told the E-Commerce Times: "It's hard to find a ton of things wrong with eBay. Some sellers complain about them, but where else are they going to reach that many buyers?"

With so many users, Blank suggested, it would be surprising if no one grumbled. "Some people will be unhappy," he noted. "But it's hard to take those complaints seriously."

Pursglove seemed to agree that eBay has done a good job of battling its "dark side." "Let's face it, we have gotten it wrong a few times," he noted. "But for the most part, we believe we do a good job of listening to the community and working well with the users."

Blank said he believes problems and snafus will amount to only a minor blemish on eBay's record.

"This is one of those unique stories where the market leader is not widely reviled," he said. "I mean, look at Microsoft. They're the leader, but so many people hate them, whereas for eBay there seems to be nothing but love."

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